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News

Friday, December 01, 2006

Adoption is unique process for grandparents

By Audora Burg
Sturgis Journal

Published: Friday, December 1, 2006 12:05 PM CST
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The Thyng family - mom Jeri, Brandon, Kaylee, Chris, dad Michael, Randy, and Stephanie spend family time one afternoon after school. Michael and Jeri adopted their five grandchildren Sept. 26; today they are adopting the youngest grandchild, Katie (not pictured) during Adoption Day at St. Joseph County Probate Court.

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Editor's note: This is the second in a three-part series about adoption. On Wednesday, see highlights from Adoption Day and a look at the role foster parenting plays in making kids "adoptable."

When Michael and Jeri Thyng are out with their brood of seven, they often get The Question.

"Are these all your kids?"

Sometimes they give the simple answer.

"The parents are into drugs. We're taking the kids."

Other times they provide a longer, detailed response: yes.

Then they take a breath and start the explanation: after they became grandparents, they found themselves being mom and dad ??? to their grandchildren.

The saga began in 1999 with the birth of the fourth grandchild, Randy.

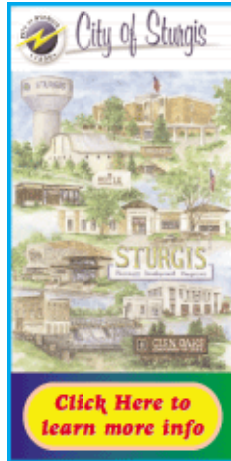
*Randy's older siblings ??? Stephanie, 5, Brandon, 4 1/2, and Kaylee, 20 months old ??? were living in **Georgia** with their parents Scott and Beth, the Thyngs' son and daughter-in-law.*

*Then baby Randy was born, and the state of **Georgia** took temporary custody of him in the hospital. Scott went into hiding with the other three; he asked his parents to come get the children.*

"We told them they wouldn't get them back until they (Scott and Beth) straightened out," Jeri said.

A tense 30 days

Michael drove to Georgia, picking up the children in the middle of the night. The next



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Index	Last Trade	Change
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SP 500	1395.01	-5.62 ↓
Russ 2000	779.66	-6.46 ↓
AMEX	2064.56	-4.60 ↓
NYSE	8939.34	-29.66 ↓
30 YR BOND	45.53	-0.08 ↓

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December 2006

					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						



day, Thyngs told the caseworker they had Stephanie, Brandon and Kaylee.

The caseworker said Randy's case would go to court three days later; if the Thyngs were there, the caseworker would hand Randy to them and close the case.

Short-term, the four children were safe; long-term, this efficiency hurt the Thyngs' future adoption efforts in Michigan.

They arranged their working lives around the children, so one of them could always be there. Jeri gave up her in-home daycare business to concentrate on the four and worked an evening shift as manager at Dairy Queen. Michael, who is a Michigan State Police trooper, worked third shift at the post in White Pigeon.

They also began the process to get guardianship of all four, but they had no plans at that point to adopt. They were sheltering and nurturing the kids until Scott and Beth were able to be parents.

Even so, it was a tense 30 days until guardianship was awarded, because they were nervous Scott and Beth might change their minds.

"Because legally, we didn't have a leg to stand on if my son and his wife came back to get them," Jeri said.

She said they were naive in thinking that losing a child would inspire Scott and Beth to change.

Hopes raised

For a while, it looked as though they might. Beth got "pretty clean," filed for visitation rights and was put on a visitation schedule. That went well at first, Jeri said, until the kids were allowed to visit Beth's house in Indiana. They started to have behavior problems.

In 2004, Beth got pregnant again. She stopped seeing the four kids when she was about six months pregnant with child No. 5, Chris.

By that time, it was clear to the Thyngs that Beth and Scott would never pull it together. But they found themselves in legal limbo: for the four children to be free for adoption, their parents had to be declared unfit.

The Michigan courts would declare Scott and Beth unfit if the state of Georgia did ??? but Georgia never did. They had closed the case on Randy, child No. 4, a single step prior to declaring the parents unfit.

In June 2005, the kids' nearly six-year placement with the Thyngs took a turn toward permanency when Beth called at 3 a.m. to say the state of Georgia would be taking 16-month-old Chris.

"Will you come get him?" she asked.

Jeri told her, "Yes, but social services will be involved this time."

Path to adoption opens

"It's because of the fifth one that we were able to adopt them," Jeri said. "We think Chris was our little helper, because we had the right people guiding us."

Because of the way they got Chris ??? in an emergency situation, living in a pickup truck or a tent on the side of the road ??? the door opened for the other four to be adopted.

In addition, Thyngs discovered the range of medical and psychological services and assistance that had been available for the other four ??? if they had only known.

"It was a rough year," Jeri said. "But it's been a year of learning more."

Only a couple of weeks after they got Chris, the Thyngs had heard Beth was pregnant again. They didn't intend to take that baby.

When Scott and Beth moved to Coldwater, Michael and Jeri asked their St. Joseph County adoption worker some questions.

"What do we do? How do we let them (Branch County authorities) know there (will be) a baby over there at risk?"

In March 2006, the Thyngs got a phone call: a little girl was born this morning in Coldwater ??? do you want her? If not, she's going to another family member.

Despite their earlier intentions not to take that baby, there was no decision to be made.

"We both agreed we couldn't let another child be ruined," Jeri said.

Michael had planned a party to celebrate Jeri's 50th birthday. They turned her party into a baby shower.

They also started proceedings to terminate the parental rights for baby Katie. A month before the process was due to end, Beth and Scott signed off. Katie was free for adoption.

In addition, the legal red tape holding Stephanie, Brandon, Kaylee, Randy and Chris was finally untangled; their adoption was finalized Sept. 26.

Katie's adoption will be finalized today, during the "Adoption Day" celebration at St. Joseph County Probate Court.

A fresh start, with scars

The kids now have a chance in life, but they also have a lot of ground to make up.

"We were very naive when we got the kids," Jeri said. "We thought that love and security

would be enough. We didn't understand the trauma the kids had been through."

"They did things we thought were from being poorly raised" ??? a boy urinating on his sister's dolls or the kids smearing feces on the wall. "We thought we just had to teach them and didn't realize it had to do with the things that they had lost (nurturing)," Jeri said.

The price has been high emotionally for Michael and Jeri as well.

The hardest part for her, at first, was "the disappointment in my child (Scott). I have no communication with my son, but the kids are my priority. He's an adult, he's made his choices in life," she said.

There's also the impact on her relationship with Michael.

"Michael and I losing our time together," Jeri said. "We were just at the point where we could do things (their two younger sons were 13 and 16) then we got the first four grandkids," she said. "We're not going to have a normal retirement."

Michael shares her frustration. "I tell her I'm not going to retire until I die ??? I've got too many kids," he said.

Yet what else could they have done, she asked.

"In our situation, they (kids) are family, but everybody goes, 'how could you do this?' I said, 'how could we not at that point?' Then we ask: 'how could we turn our back on them? What kind of people would we be?'" Jeri said.

She knows the kind of person her husband is.

"The most amazing thing through all this has been him," she said. "He didn't have to take

them in, he didn't have to treat them like they were his own."

And there are signs of hope with the children.

Brandon was featured in the newspaper for the DARE essay he wrote about his own experience of losing parents to drugs. The positive attention was a great thing for him, Jeri said.

It's been difficult for Stephanie, and her behavior has concerned the Thyngs.

The counselor told Jeri, "(Stephanie) is going to test you, to see if (she's) really bad, will you give (her) away?"

So Jeri) started telling her, "Stephanie, no matter what you do, I'm going to love you."

She wasn't sure if her daughter "got" the unconditional love message.

Then she had the chance to read what Stephanie wrote to her younger brother, with whom she doesn't usually get along: "No matter what you do, I'm going to love you."

She got it.

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